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Beyond Strauss, lies, and the war in Iraq: Hannah Arendt's critique of neoconservatism

PATRICIA OWENS*

Abstract. What are we to make of the neoconservative challenge to traditional international thought? Should we content ourselves, as many have done, to return to classical realism in response? Rather than offer another realist assessment of neoconservative foreign policy this article turns to Hannah Arendt. In a very different language, Arendt articulated a critique of the dangers of moralism in the political realm that avoids realist cynicism. She is also better placed to challenge the neoconservative vision of international affairs, ideological conviction, and their relationship to democratic society. Reading Arendt against Leo Strauss suggests that the fundamental problem with neoconservative ideology concerns its understanding of the place of philosophy in the public realm, the relationship between political thought and practice, ideas and action. She suggests why neoconservatives may be experts at selling wars but seem less adept at winning them.

I think commitment can easily carry you to a point where you no longer think.¹

Since the 1970s, neoconservative thinkers have argued that the foreign policy establishment in the United States, dominated by the realist mind-set, is too risk-averse and, somewhat oddly considering its source, too *conservative*. Realism as a theory of world politics is viewed as too relativistic, uncomfortable when speaking in language of right and wrong. This damages the United States' moral high-ground and recognition of its own national greatness. In the past, neoconservatives argue, realists underestimated the wealth of moral righteousness that was necessary to sustain the sacrifices that eventually won the Cold War. The parched language of 'stability', 'balance of power' and the 'national interest' cannot rally the American people to a visionary commitment. Its political rhetoric is incapable of sustaining what President George W. Bush described as the 'distinctly American internationalism' integral to fighting the new global war on terror. Realist ideas are insufficient to

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¹ Hannah Arendt, 'On Hannah Arendt', in Melvyn Hill (ed.), *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World* (New York: St. Martin's Press), p. 308.

mobilise the American public for the sacrifice of blood and money to keep the Republic – and the world – safe *today*.²

Neoconservatism poses a powerful challenge to international theory. Its proponents speak of power *and* morality, credibility, interests *and* values.³ Liberal internationalist ideas about human rights are repackaged in a neo-Reaganite language of morality, US prestige and zealous patriotism. Unlike liberals, neoconservatives are not shy of unilateral military action; they embrace it. That 'ideas matter' is an obvious claim to neoconservatives. But the content of their world-changing ideas contains a different emphasis to liberals. They use the language not of international organisations and cooperation, but of patriotic moral clarity and the historic, universal values of 'America'. Neoconservatives share with realists a view of world politics as dangerous. However, the world is not divided into competing states rationally pursuing interests. The human condition is defined as a struggle between good and evil. The fight against evil, as articulated by President Bush, is imbued with greater meaning through the citation of religious conviction and eschatology.⁴ Neoconservatives are confident about the material and ideological power of the United States to shape the human condition. In a vein similar to more optimistic liberal-constructivist work, they believe in the power of ideas such as 'freedom' and 'democracy' to change the world when allied with American power.⁵

The dominant ideological justification for the United States invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 was provided by neoconservatism. This is widely understood. But some of the claims about the connection between the ideas of Leo Strauss (1899–1973), the influential neoconservative philosopher, and the Iraq invasion have been truly grand indeed. According to one critic of the Iraq war, Strauss and his neoconservative followers provided the Bush administration with the politically useful 'philosophy of the noble lie, the conviction that lies, far from being simply a regrettable necessity of political life, are instead virtuous and noble instruments of wise policy'.⁶ Christopher Hitchens, influential supporter of the war, wrote that 'part of the charm' of regime change in Iraq 'is that it depends on premises and objectives that cannot . . . be publicly avowed. Since Paul Wolfowitz [then Deputy Secretary of Defense] is from the intellectual school of Leo Strauss . . . one may even suppose that

² Lawrence F. Kaplan and William Kristol, *The War over Iraq: Saddam's Tyranny and America's Mission* (San Francisco, CA: Encounter Books, 2003); Michael C. Williams, 'What is the National Interest? The Neoconservative Challenge in IR Theory', *European Journal of International Relations*, 11:3 (2005), pp. 307–37.

³ There are differences in emphasis among neoconservative foreign policy thinkers. For example, Charles Krauthammer, a self-described 'democratic realist', differs from William Kristol and Robert Kagan who are more interventionist, more moralist, less classically 'realist'. Krauthammer, 'In Defense of Democratic Realism', *The National Interest* (Fall 2004).

⁴ President Bush's own religiosity should not be taken to assume that most neoconservative intellectuals are also Christian, or even especially religious. And it must not be confused with any idea that foreign policy neoconservatives are pursuing a specific religious agenda such as Zionism. There is more continuity than change in Bush's religious rhetoric. Every presidential inaugural address has evoked the guiding hand of a Christian God. I thank Dan Twining for this point.

⁵ Alexander Wendt, 'What is IR For?: Notes Toward a Post-Critical View', in Richard Wyn Jones (ed.), *Critical Theory and World Politics* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2000), pp. 205–24. 'Liberal idealism', in the words of Jeanne Kirkpatrick, 'need not be identical with masochism, and need not be incompatible with the defense of freedom and the national interest'. 'Dictatorships and Double Standards', *Commentary*, 68:5 (1979), p. 4.

⁶ Earl Shorris, 'Ignoble Liars: Leo Strauss, George Bush and the Philosophy of Mass Deception', *Harpers Magazine*, June 2004.

he enjoys this arcane and occluded aspect of the debate'.⁷ On this view, the secret premise behind the invasion of Iraq was that there were, indeed, 'root causes' behind the 9/11 attacks: the Cold War policy of supporting despotic regimes in the Middle East. The appearance of mendacity and misleading statements from the Bush administration, the bold misrepresentation of intelligence estimates about weapons of mass destruction, and dishonest arguments about links between Iraq and 9/11, provoked wild accusations of conspiracy and lies to justify an otherwise unjustifiable war.

The implication of such claims is that lying in politics is a sin peculiar to neoconservatives and may even have been condoned by Leo Strauss.⁸ What should we make of these allegations? There is an immediate temptation to dismiss such views. Indeed, we should. The Bush administration's notorious clash with factual truth in relation to Iraq had little to do with any belief in 'noble lies'. Certain of Strauss's works do indeed give the impression that political lying can be righteous, even 'noble'.⁹ Strauss did not clearly set out his own political thought. Rather others have sought to decipher his views. This has led to much confusion and in-fighting concerning what Strauss did and did not believe. While always noting the 'obscurity', difficulty, and 'alien character' of his writing, Straussians seem to take pride in the level of controversy provoked by his work; and, indeed, commentators observe that his writing 'continues to shatter respectable intellectual categories and rules'.¹⁰ But lying in politics is not a sin peculiar to neoconservatives and would probably not have been condoned by Strauss.¹¹

However, there is a need for further reflection on Strauss and the philosophical roots of neoconservative thought. It is possible to understand the contentious political debates surrounding the invasion and occupation of Iraq, including the appearance of mendacity, through a richer understanding of early neoconservative thought. The 'neoconservative persuasion'¹² and its political influence are based on more than a 'cabal' of influential men who are willing to lie on behalf of some greater cause.¹³ It rests on firm and clearly set-out theoretical foundations directly relevant

⁷ Hitchens, *A Long Short War: The Postponed Liberation of Iraq* (New York: Plume, 2003), p. 17.

⁸ Shadia B. Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, updated edn., new Introduction (New York: Palgrave, 2005); Kenneth R. Weinstein, 'Philosophic Roots, the Role of Leo Strauss, and the War in Iraq', in Irwin Stelzer (ed.), *The Neocon Reader* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), pp. 201–12; Larry George, 'Leo Strauss, Neoconservatism and US Foreign Policy: Esoteric Nihilism and the Bush Doctrine', *International Politics*, 42:2 (2005), pp. 174–202.

⁹ It is possible to argue that Strauss believed that those who possessed wisdom about the natural (hierarchical) order of social and political life must be cautious about the diffusion of this knowledge; for the sake of the people and for the sake of the philosopher's safety. He thus appeared to suggest that philosophers ought to conceal their doubts about religion and truth to sustain a number of functional myths. Through the concealment of dangerous truths both the philosopher and the political order are protected. To lie, therefore, may be moral; it protects the wise and maintains social order. The morally and intellectually inferior must believe in 'noble lies', 'statements which, while being useful for the political community, are nevertheless lies'. Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 69, 66.

¹⁰ Thomas L. Pangle, 'Editor's Introduction', in Leo Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, p. vii.

¹¹ Jenny Strauss Clay, 'The Real Leo Strauss', *New York Times*, 7 June 2003.

¹² Irving Kristol, 'The Neoconservative Persuasion' *Weekly Standard*, 47, 25 August 2003.

¹³ We are focused less on individuals and more on ideas and ideology. There is already a large literature on the role of influential individuals and how they shaped the justification and conduct of the invasion of Iraq. See Peter Steinfels, *The Neoconservatives: The Men Who are Changing*

to contemporary public policy and justifications for war.¹⁴ It is through understanding these foundations that we can begin to understand why neoconservative ideas became so popular in the United States after the 9/11 attacks and how they helped take the United States into the Iraq war.

Classical realists certainly offer a persuasive critique of the dangers and hypocrisy of moralising international affairs and possess a more sophisticated vision of domestic politics than is often assumed.¹⁵ These thinkers presaged some of the concerns contemporary foreign policy analysts have expressed about the neoconservative vision.¹⁶ But we should not content ourselves, as many have done, to return to classical realism in response to the failures of neoconservatism in Iraq.¹⁷ The realist-‘neocon’ conversation will no longer suffice. We must turn to another interlocutor. In a very different language from that of classical realism, Hannah Arendt (1906–74) articulated a critique of the dangers of moralism in the political realm that avoids realist cynicism.¹⁸ She is also better placed to challenge the neoconservative vision of international affairs, ‘the automatic thought-reactions’ of ideological conviction and their relationship to democratic society.¹⁹ She reminds us that there is a natural clash between factual truth and politics that is only exacerbated by the peculiarities of neoconservative ideology. To liberate Iraq was ideologically mandated; influential neoconservatives had their theory and strength of moral conviction ‘and’, to borrow Arendt’s words from a different context, ‘all data that did not fit were denied or ignored’.²⁰ The origins of lying in politics are found in the nature of the political realm itself. It is tempting and even easy to lie in politics because the lie itself is a form of action. Almost by nature the

America’s Politics (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980); John Ehrman, *The Rise of Neoconservatism: Intellectuals and Foreign Affairs 1945–1994* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995); James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush’s War Cabinet* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2004). This article does not rely on any claims about the direct influence of Strauss on specific men or their acceptance of the neoconservative label. See Robert Kagan, ‘I Am Not a Straussian: At Least, I Don’t Think I am’, *Weekly Standard*, 20 November 2006.

- ¹⁴ Kenneth L. Deutsch and John A. Murley (eds.), *Leo Strauss, the Straussians, and the American Regime* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), and Michael C. Desch, ‘What Would Strauss Do?’ *The American Conservative*, 17 January 2005.
- ¹⁵ E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1939); Hans J. Morgenthau, *The Purpose of American Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1960) and *Truth and Power: Essays of a Decade* (New York: Knopf, 1970).
- ¹⁶ John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, ‘An Unnecessary War’, *Foreign Policy*, 137 (January–February, 2003), pp. 51–62; Philip Gold, *Take Back the Right: How the Neocons and the Religious Right Have Hijacked the Conservative Movement* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2004), ch. 9; Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006); Michael C. Williams, ‘Morgenthau Now: Neoconservatism, National Greatness, and Realism’, in Michael C. Williams (ed.), *Realism Reconsidered: The Legacy of Hans Morgenthau in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).
- ¹⁷ Robert Gilpin, ‘War is Too Important to be Left to Ideological Amateurs’, *International Relations*, 19:1 (2005), pp. 5–18; Williams, ‘What is the National Interest?’.
- ¹⁸ For an excellent account of the similarities and divergences between Arendt and classical realists such as Morgenthau and Kennan see Douglas Klusmeyer, ‘Hannah Arendt’s Critical Realism: Power, Justice, and Responsibility’, in Anthony F. Lang Jr. and John Williams (eds.), *Hannah Arendt and International Relations: Readings Across the Lines* (London: Palgrave, 2005), pp. 113–78. Arendt and Morgenthau were friends. According to a student of both, she considered ‘heroic’ his ‘resignation from the National Security Council – . . . the only member of Lyndon Johnson’s administration to take such a step – in protest over the Vietnam War’. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Why Arendt Matters* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 34.
- ¹⁹ Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1970), p. 225.
- ²⁰ Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), p. 39.

liar is an actor because the liar wants to change the world from what is to what they want it to be.

In contrast to the repetitive and unchanging tasks of some other human activities, political action is the realm in which we are truly capable of changing the world. Given this ever-changing character, factual statements about what is the case are fragile. For as Arendt wrote, 'no factual statement can ever be beyond doubt – as secure and shielded against attack as, for instance, the statement that two and two make four'.²¹ Note the kind of truth to which Arendt was referring. She clearly distinguished between rational truth and facts. Rational truth is the business of philosophic speculation. Through rational argumentation (or simply faith) the philosopher (or theologian) may believe they have constructed the truth of claims such as 'all humans are created equal'. This is not a factual 'truth' of the kind political actors must establish to make proper judgements about the legitimacy of a particular war.²²

Arendt's writing suggests that the fatal flaw of neoconservative ideology concerns its understanding of the place of philosophy in the public realm, the relationship between political thought and practice, ideas and action.²³ These relationships do not tell us everything we need to know about the changing character of war and its relationship to democratic society. Nor do they tell us everything we need to know about the politics of foreign policy debates within the Republican Party after 9/11.²⁴ But we cannot fully understand the US decision to go to war in Iraq without understanding the basic ideas and principles, revealed in the public culture and rhetorical forms, shaping the political regime that started it. Arendt offers a systematic refutation of neoconservative ideas and its wider agenda in both domestic and international politics. A critic of all forms of 'hubristic radicalism',²⁵ she offers international theory new grounds – and a new way to articulate – older realist concerns about the dangers of moralism, especially in wartime, and the arrogance of power that believes the world can change because it is so willed and ideologically mandated. Irving Kristol, so-called godfather of neoconservatism, once claimed that 'in the modern world, a non-ideological politics is a politics disarmed'.²⁶ But for Arendt, it is in fact ideology that disarms politics.

²¹ Ibid., p. 6.

²² Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking, 1968), p. 238.

²³ Arendt rarely referred to neoconservatism and died before the full political force of its ideas were felt. In a 1956 essay she wrote, 'Neo-conservatism, which has won a surprisingly large following in recent years, is primarily cultural and educational, and not political or social in outlook; it appeals to a mood and concern which are direct results of the elimination of authority from the relationship between young and old, teacher and pupil, parents and children'. 'Authority in the Twentieth Century', *Review of Politics*, 18:4 (1956), p. 404.

²⁴ The influence of neoconservatism in the Republican Party is obviously important. But we should not assume that neoconservative foreign policy ideas are only attractive to those on the political right. See Oliver Kamm, *Anti-Totalitarianism: The Left-Wing Case for a Neoconservative Foreign Policy* (foreword by Martin Bell) (London: Social Affairs Unit, 2005) and Thomas Cushman (ed.), *A Matter of Principle: Humanitarian Arguments for War in Iraq* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005).

²⁵ Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 24.

²⁶ Irving Kristol, *Reflections of a Neoconservative Looking Back, Looking Ahead* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), p. ix.

The search for a new foundation

There are a number of resemblances between the philosophical roots of neoconservatism and the issues that concerned Hannah Arendt. German Jews in the early twentieth century, Arendt and Leo Strauss began their intellectual journey from the same place and from similar traditions of thought. Indeed, they were acquaintances in the early years of Hitler's rule and much later colleagues at the University of Chicago. The Nazi take-over and destruction of European Jewry became the focal point of their thinking about politics, and what was necessary for 'the political' to have meaning in the post-Holocaust world. Both fled to the United States as a result of World War II and with their arrival, as Anne Norton writes, 'the study of the political returned to the American academy, and with a vengeance'.²⁷ Both drew lessons from the politics and philosophy of Athens, though Arendt was far more critical of what she found there. Both were critics of positivist social science. Strauss's influence on political philosophy in the United States has arguably been greater if we take as evidence that 'a school formed around' him.²⁸ Arendt and Strauss both wrote about the American Founding and in many ways accepted the idea of America's political experience as exceptional.

Yet, the differences between Arendt and Strauss are far greater than their similarities. This is the other motivation for initiating a further dialogue between neoconservatism and Arendt. Her name has frequently been invoked in the context of the recent resurgence of neoconservative thought, but as an inspiration and ally.²⁹ Several thinkers associated with neoconservatism point to Arendt's influence.³⁰ The story Norton tells about Leo Strauss is also, in part, a story told about Arendt. Diverse schools of thought, to be sure, legitimately claim Arendt's writing. She is one of a number of 'charismatic legitimators'.³¹ And the misreading of Arendt by Straussians is not without some justification.³² But the association between Arendt and neoconservatism is superficial at best. They possessed entirely different

²⁷ Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 55.

²⁸ Peter Graf Kielmansegg, 'Introduction', in Kielmansegg, Horst Mewes, and Elisabeth Glaser-Schmidt (eds.), *Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss: German Emigrés and American Political Thought after World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 5.

²⁹ Kristol, *Reflections of a Neoconservative*, p. 80; William Pietz, 'The "Post-Colonialism" of Cold War Discourse', *Social Text*, 19–20 (1988), pp. 55–75; Norman Podhoretz, *Ex-Friends: Falling Out with Allen Ginsberg, Lionel and Diana Trilling, Lillian Hellman, Hannah Arendt, and Norman Mailer* (New York: Free Press, 1999); Giles Scott-Smith, *The Politics of Apolitical Culture: The Congress for Cultural Freedom, the CIA and Post-War American Hegemony* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 43–4; Williams, 'What is the National Interest?', p. 316.

³⁰ One historian of neoconservatism has noted that Jeanne Kirkpatrick's 'views were crystallised when she heard Hannah Arendt speak . . . Arendt, who taught that the left was just as capable of mounting terror as the right, was one of the shaping forces of neoconservatism'. Murray Friedman, *The Neoconservative Revolution: Jewish Intellectuals and the Shaping of Public Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 154. 'Here, as elsewhere one sees the affinities between the students of Strauss and the students of Arendt, for it is Arendt's understanding of totalitarianism that is at work'. Norton, *Leo Strauss*, p. 128. In fact, Arendt was horrified that *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (new edition with added prefaces: New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966) became a staple of Cold War propaganda. She did not view post-World War II world politics as a struggle between the forces of freedom and a monolithic Communism.

³¹ Martin Jay, *Force Field: Between Intellectual History and Cultural Critique* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 168.

³² Some of Arendt's concerns about politics in the modern age also echo those of Irving Kristol. Arendt argued that the increasing identification of freedom with the ability to accumulate personal

evaluations of political action. For Arendt, political action is unpredictable in its outcomes. For Strauss and his neoconservative followers it is ideology that gives political action its certainty and political actors their moral conviction.

There are a number of ways to reconstruct Arendt's (usually hidden) criticisms of Strauss and the foundations of neoconservative thought.³³ Here we highlight their differences over the relationship between politics and philosophy because it is at the root of a number of flaws in neoconservative ideological thinking about the recent past and the relationship between politics and war. Unlike Strauss, Arendt was strongly against the idea that ancient philosophy could invigorate modern democracy.³⁴ Indeed, quite the reverse. She was highly critical of the anti-political character of Greek thought, preferring to draw lessons from their political experience.³⁵ Strauss was far more attracted to Greek philosophy, implying that the many ought to (and do) consent to be ruled by the virtuous few. Some of his harshest critics have taken this to mean that one of the 'defining features of his work' was the 'rejection of liberal democracy'.³⁶ This is over-stated and fails to take into account the complicated task Strauss believed he had undertaken to *save* liberal democracy from ruin.

Strauss's antipathies toward liberalism and democracy have been well-documented, but not so well understood. He rarely praised democracy itself, fearing the disorder that it might bring. But he also defended liberal democracy as the least bad regime in the modern age. Indeed, the central problem of modernity, the basic political-philosophical starting point for neoconservative thought, is belief in the need for a new foundation for political order in the West. In the modern age, the single legitimate foundation for government is the democratic consent of the people. Liberal democracy places the people in the position of authority, not god or philosophy. The opinion of the democratic people, which for Strauss (unlike Arendt) was obviously inferior to philosophical truth, becomes the highest moral authority. However, for Strauss, the implied tolerance of all views risked degenerating into the belief that everybody's views, everybody's mere preferences, were equal. In the absence of older forms of religious and moral virtue, with the lack of authoritative truth, Strauss feared a dangerous vacuum had been created. As Irving Kristol, perhaps one of the most noted inheritors of Straussian thought, also believed, modern society was in a state of spiritual disintegration, afflicted by relativistic, 'nihilistic' decadence in which 'the individual must be free to create his own morality'.³⁷

Uninterested in true universal knowledge and authentic political action, the over-riding concern of the modern individual, Strauss feared, was the pursuit of mere pleasure and wealth, a 'joyless quest for joy'.³⁸ Since Max Weber, social science had

wealth, and the triumph of the archetypal liberal freedom *from* politics, deformed the political sphere.

³³ Also see Ronald Beiner, 'Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss: The Uncommenced Dialogue', *Political Theory*, 18:2 (1990), pp. 238–54.

³⁴ Dana Villa, 'The Philosopher versus the Citizen: Arendt, Strauss, and Socrates', in *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1999), pp. 155–79 and 'Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss: Citizenship versus Philosophy', in *Socratic Citizenship* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 246–98.

³⁵ This has led to false accusations of nostalgia and Hellenism (even by Straussians!) in Arendt's work. See Pangle, 'Editor's Introduction', p. xxiv.

³⁶ Shadia B. Drury, *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), p. 4.

³⁷ Irving Kristol, *Two Cheers for Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), p. 69.

³⁸ Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1950), p. 251.

argued that the ends of political life were without foundation. Since 'all these former illusions . . . have been dispelled', Weber wrote, 'the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life'.³⁹ The consequences for modern politics and society were immense; the political and the ethical were now distinguished and the logic of each was 'governed by different laws'.⁴⁰ Strauss viewed acceptance of this condition as a recipe for disaster and a denial of the true force of 'the political'. In the words of Kristol, 'one is led to question the validity of the original liberal idea that it is possible for the individual . . . to cope with the eternal dilemmas of the human condition. The moral authority of tradition, and some public support for this authority, seems to be needed'.⁴¹

Strauss rejected the 'historicist' or 'relativist' argument that all value-claims concerning moral authority were contingent on particular historical circumstances. Conflict over values, Strauss believed, ought to be conducted through and expressed in 'universal terms', that is, of the 'political order which is best always and everywhere'.⁴² In *Natural Right and History*, he invoked the passage in the American Declaration of Independence related to self-evident truths and unalienable rights. This 'self-evidence', he suggested, is endangered by the 'retail sanity and wholesale madness' of relativism and historicism. Strauss wrote:

Political things are by their nature subject to approval or disapproval, to choice and rejection, to praise and blame. It is of their essence not to be neutral but to raise a claim to men's obedience, allegiance, decision, or judgment. One does not understand them as what they are, as political things, if one does not take seriously their explicit or implicit claim to be judged in terms of goodness or badness, of justice or injustice . . . To judge soundly one must know the true standards.⁴³

Any effort to avoid value judgements about the fundamental questions of the human condition was an absurdity and affront to decency and morality.

Both Strauss and Kristol believed that the new foundation for the modern age was located in the first principles of the American regime. There are things 'essential to all political communities'. The most important is the founding of the political constitution, the 'permanent framework within which the right handling of changing situations by excellent politicians or statesmen can take place'.⁴⁴ Different regimes encapsulate and embody different answers to the profound questions of political organisation as well as represent the particular, specific language and customs of a community. Many of Strauss's ideas centre on the importance of political regimes and involve quasi-religious praise for the founding of the American republic. During this founding, philosophical statesmen displayed the 'most "architectonic" political skill that is known to political life'.⁴⁵ In this moment of political excellence wise men designed a political order to which the modern masses could consent.

³⁹ Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 143, 155.

⁴⁰ Weber, *From Max Weber*, p. 123.

⁴¹ Kristol, *Two Cheers*, p. xi.

⁴² Strauss, *Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, p. 56.

⁴³ Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 12.

⁴⁴ Strauss, *Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, p. 53.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 53. 'Bush's advocacy of "regime change" – which avoids the pitfalls of a wishful global universalism on the one hand, and a fatalistic cultural determinism on the other – is a not altogether unworthy product of Strauss's rehabilitation of the notion of regime'. Steven Lenzner and William Kristol, 'What was Leo Strauss up to?', *The Public Interest*, 153 (2003), p. 38.

In the past, 'noble' men acted with a dignity in politics now largely absent in the modern age. But politics itself, Strauss nonetheless argued, 'derives its dignity from something which transcends political life'. Defending Plato's hierarchical ordering of human activities, Strauss believed 'political life was necessarily inferior to contemplative life'.⁴⁶ Where the former dealt with mere opinions, the latter activity was capable of discerning true standards; it was 'the ascent from opinions to knowledge or to truth'.⁴⁷ As such, the political philosopher is the 'umpire', who rules over and settles the political controversies of the unruly public sphere. Philosophical truth transcends the political realm of mere opinion. This is possible because the 'knowledge of the political philosopher is "transferable" to the highest degree'. As evidence, Strauss cited Plato's frequent comparisons between 'political science and medicine'.⁴⁸

The privileging of philosophy over political action, truth over opinion, according to both Strauss and Arendt, originated in Plato's exasperation with democratic political action after the trial and death of Socrates. The philosopher-citizen, the questioner, was condemned for leading astray the Athenian youth. It was precisely the uncertainty and unpredictability of political action, the fact that the public was often arbitrary and irrational (to such a degree that Socrates is killed) which explains the long-standing desire of philosophers to escape from politics and eliminate its negative consequences. Arendt quotes Pascal: 'The most philosophic [thing] was to live simply and quietly. If they [Plato and Aristotle] wrote on politics, it was as if laying down rules for a lunatic asylum'.⁴⁹ Before outlining the neoconservative solution to the dangers of unruly public action we must briefly pause to note Arendt's objection to Plato's hierarchical ordering of philosophy over politics, rational truth over democratic opinion, that so animated Strauss.

Arendt considered it in the very nature of philosophy to be hostile to politics. Philosophy requires withdrawal from the public world. She referred to thinking itself as the solitary internal 'dialogue between me and myself'.⁵⁰ In contrast to the worldliness of political action, thinking was 'unworldly'. The activity of the philosopher is essentially passive. Where thinking is done in solitude, politics always encounters a plurality of opinion; political knowledge is always perspectival. Though thinking importantly thrives on an anticipated communication with others, there is no unity between thought and political action.⁵¹ Indeed, even if this were so it would not be fortuitous: 'You can't say A without saying B and C and so on, down to the end of the murderous alphabet'.⁵²

The anti-democratic and anti-political character of attempts to govern politics through ideology or philosophy was clear to Arendt. It was a principled dimension of her work that such endeavours were destructive of the very political freedom these blueprints sought, at least in theory, to render. Politics is such that no theory can

⁴⁶ Strauss, *Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, p. 64, 161.

⁴⁷ Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1950), p. 124.

⁴⁸ Strauss, *Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, p. 54.

⁴⁹ Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 22.

⁵⁰ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 220.

⁵¹ Of course, Arendt believed that thinking and acting were connected. However, she rejected the effort to ensure that the mentality of one enjoyed hegemony over the other.

⁵² Arendt, *Origins*, p. 472.

adequately be 'applied' without destroying the very essence of political life.⁵³ To think and to act are not the same: 'all our categories of thought and standards for judgment seem to explode in our hands the instant we try to apply them'.⁵⁴ The point, contra Strauss, is that politics involves 'matters of opinion and not the truth'.⁵⁵ Opinion and truth can be considered as almost opposites. Talking something through and forming an opinion, an 'opinion among opinions', is central to the formation of a political realm. For Arendt, opinion, *doxa*, is not 'mere' opinion, as it is for Strauss.

Like Strauss, Arendt believed that some forms of truth were an anathema to politics, but for an entirely different reason. Modes of thought and communication that claim truth, she believed, 'are necessarily domineering' because 'they don't take into account other people's opinions . . . , the hallmark of all strictly political thinking'.⁵⁶ Profound 'truth' needs no agreement. It simply is. As noted by Strauss, the American Declaration of Independence sought to enshrine certain principles, such as the idea that 'all men are created equal', as beyond dispute. This is why certain 'truths' were deemed 'self-evident'. But the statement of equality was not 'true'; it was a matter of agreed opinion. Contra Strauss, these opinions were held not because they were self-evidently 'true', but because they were *necessary* for democratic politics to begin; 'freedom is possible only among equals'.⁵⁷ Arendt emphasised the authority of the agreement 'we hold', rather than the 'self-evident' nature of the truth when Jefferson declared 'We hold these truths to be self-evident'.⁵⁸ The significant revolutionary action was the 'necessarily relative' agreement. In the absence of 'transcending standards, everything remains relative'.⁵⁹

Since Plato, however, philosophers have sought to construct absolute standards, appropriate models for political conduct that could be applied to human affairs. Dana Villa nicely summarises Arendt's diagnosis of the effect on almost the entire tradition of Western political thought: 'Throughout . . . the faculty of reason is called upon to identify the idea or *telos* of justice, and to show how this idea can be realized concretely in the world. In Plato, Hobbes, Hegel, and Marx the "theoretical" analysis first isolates the (ideal) end, and then reveals the means by which it will be – or has been – produced (by philosopher-kings, a sovereign definer of rights and duties, world history, or proletarian revolution)'.⁶⁰ Strauss, as part of this tradition, called for the subjection of political action and the vagaries of opinion to the authority of philosophical reason. Using Arendt's specific lexicon, we might say Strauss sought to transcend human plurality and overcome the 'fundamental relativity' of the 'interhuman realm'.⁶¹

In summary, Strauss held historicism and relativism to blame for the crisis of authority in modern society; the decadent amorality of liberalism needed to be

⁵³ This particular critique of neoconservatism also applies to some critical international theory. According to Andrew Linklater, the 'fundamental conflict in the world system' is not between states, but competing *ideologies* – emancipatory versus all others. *Beyond Realism and Marxism: Critical Theory and International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 21.

⁵⁴ Arendt, *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism* (New York, Schocken, 2005), p. 302.

⁵⁵ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 247.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

⁵⁸ Arendt, *On Revolution*, pp. 92–4.

⁵⁹ Arendt, 'Philosophy and Politics', *Social Research*, 71:3 (2004), p. 428.

⁶⁰ Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror*, p. 94.

⁶¹ Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1968), p. 27.

defeated. In praising the founding of the American republic, early neoconservatives drew attention to the dangers not only from outside tyrannies but from weakness within. As already indicated, a central flaw of secular liberal democracy, on this view, was the failure of modern individuals to believe that the good life rested on anything more than individual preference. To see how this is captured presently, we turn again to a modern-day neoconservative thinker. One wholly 'negative consequence of the disestablishment of religion as a publicly sanctioned mythos', Kristol wrote, 'has been the inability of liberal society ever to come up with a convincing and generally accepted theory of political obligation'.⁶² If the good life can be found in private pursuits, what motive is there for public-spiritedness, public action?

The only salvation for the modern masses was to enter into mortal combat over values. Indeed, for Strauss, this was the essence of political life. The political was above all defined by the struggle for power, 'characterized by conflicts between men asserting opposed claims'.⁶³ Strauss, like Carl Schmitt with whom he conducted a close dialogue, viewed politics as an antagonistic struggle to the death.⁶⁴ Just as Nazi ideology had stepped into the breach in interwar Europe, the most ruthless and articulate men of action were destined to fill the spiritual and political vacuum created by liberal modernity. Strauss's project in the revival of political philosophy was to ensure the postwar moral and spiritual vacuum was appropriately filled.

In direct contrast to Strauss, Arendt frequently warned that the hierarchical ordering of philosophy over politics was a denial of the fundamental relativity of all political opinion and action. Rather than see the dangers in the loss of traditional authority, Arendt saw the contingency and relativity of political affairs as an opportunity. Unlike Weber, who saw modern humanity stranded in an 'iron-cage' of rationality,⁶⁵ Arendt held out more hope for the promise of democratic politics. 'Even though we have lost yardsticks by which to measure', she wrote, 'and rules under which to subsume the particular, a being whose essence is beginning may have enough of origin within himself to understand without preconceived categories and to judge without the customary rules which is morality'.⁶⁶ Rather than posing a nihilistic threat, Arendt believed that the abandonment of Plato's hierarchy bestowed

⁶² Kristol, *Two Cheers*, p. 64.

⁶³ Strauss, *Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, pp. 59, 51.

⁶⁴ See Heinrich Meier (ed.), *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1995) and Leo Strauss, 'Notes on Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*', in Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 83–107.

⁶⁵ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976), p. 181.

⁶⁶ Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, p. 321. Arendt always associated the political promise of this form of freedom with the ability to create something new. This faculty of action was rooted in St Augustine's concept of natality; the fact of human birth suggests that we are, in fact, new beginners. Each new life is a new beginning and through political action with a plurality of others it is possible to make new beginnings throughout our lives. That we may begin the world anew, however, does not mean that we have the power to control it. Political actors rarely gain what they set out to achieve. Their goals are always overrun by the nature of political action where, just as in war, the totally unexpected is normal. See *Origins*, p. 478; *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, p. 13. Jean Bethke Elshtain has argued that Arendt's account of natality may point us in the direction of a more pacific form of politics, a 'pacific image that evokes love, not war'. *Meditations on Modern Political Thought: Masculine/Feminine Themes from Luther to Arendt* (New York: Praeger, 1986), p. 110. This is a stretch, not least given Arendt's view of love as 'the most powerful of all antipolitical forces'. *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 242.

a dignity on politics largely absent in the modern age; 'the abandonment of this hierarchy . . . is the abandonment of all hierarchical structures'.⁶⁷

At the same time Arendt's embrace of contingency required recognition of the limits of political action and the human capacity to change the world (including with violence) through the application of correct ideology. Neoconservative ideology embraces the use of violence to enact political change. But Arendt, like Clausewitz, fully understood the 'all-pervading unpredictability, which we encounter the moment we approach the realm of violence'.⁶⁸ Arendt understood the limitations of using violence to achieve expansive political ends in a way that challenges the apparent ease with which many neoconservatives imagined they could achieve a military victory and then a stable political order in Iraq. Violence can remain rational only to the extent that it is aimed at achieving short-term goals and any justification 'loses its plausibility the farther its intended end recedes into the future'.⁶⁹ For 'while the results of men's actions are beyond the actors' control', Arendt wrote, 'violence harbors within itself an additional element of arbitrariness'.⁷⁰

War, like all forms of violence, Arendt argued, requires justification in terms of the ends it pursues. This justification, which always involves political speech to a judging audience, is the most important element – the most political aspect – of any political theory of war. Violence may be justified by appeals to the end that its perpetrators seek to achieve. Arendt is clear, however, that there are no objective criteria to judge whether a particular act of violence is or is not justified. It is wholly determined by the performative act of justification and the judgement of those who are being addressed. The task is to persuade the audience that the violence was necessary and it is the audience alone that may judge. Violence is always instrumental and can only be justified for short term ends due to the overwhelming tendency for violence to spiral out of control, to initiate unintended consequences, in short, to overrun any potential (perhaps even justifiable) end.

Both political action and war initiate processes that can never be predicted by the principal actors themselves. Efforts to contain the unpredictability of the political realm, the search for extra-political groundings, whether based on ancient philosophy or any modern political ideology, are self-defeating and almost invariably violent. In 1975, Irving Kristol wrote that '“You can't beat a horse with no horse”, and the horses of modern politics', in neoconservative thought, 'are ideologies and the social visions they embody'.⁷¹ Returning to neoconservative justifications for the Iraq war, the next section argues that errors in its conception and execution, including the wilful denial of a number of factual truths, can be explained in terms of

⁶⁷ Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, p. 29; Canovan, *Hannah Arendt*, ch. 7.

⁶⁸ Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, p. 107. For a longer discussion of Arendt on these and other war-related themes, see Patricia Owens, *Between War and Politics: International Relations and the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁶⁹ Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, p. 151.

⁷⁰ Arendt was unimpressed by the efforts of military technicians to overcome the unexpected in war; 'nowhere does Fortuna, good or ill luck play a more fateful role in human affairs than on the battlefield'. This element of the unexpected could not 'be eliminated by simulations, scenarios, game theories, and the like'. Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, p. 106.

⁷¹ Mark Gerson, 'Reflections of a Neoconservative Disciple', in Christopher DeMuth and William Kristol (eds.), *The Neoconservative Imagination: Essays in Honor of Irving Kristol* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 1995), p. 169. Arendt understood ideologies as powerful political weapons given their 'tremendous power of persuasion'. They appealed to 'immediate political needs' without which the specifics of the ideologies could not even have been imagined. *Origins*, pp. 159, 163.

neoconservative ideological passions. They ended up having an 'hypnotic effect' putting 'to sleep . . . common sense, which', as Arendt reminds us, 'is nothing else but our mental organ for perceiving, understanding, and dealing with reality and factuality'.⁷²

The public and the politics of war

Neoconservative thinking about world politics cuts through several of the treasured theoretical distinctions upon which most international theory rests. Consider the literature on so-called 'humanitarian' military intervention, a literature dominated by liberals and constructivists.⁷³ The peculiarities of disciplinary theory-building, especially the effort to debunk a narrow view of realism, has led liberal and constructivist scholars to downplay US 'interests' in explaining 'humanitarian intervention'. Little or no engagement with the very different neoconservative defence of such wars has appeared in academe.⁷⁴ Neoconservatives say they want to change the world to one more favourable to human rights; they just believe that liberal arguments for 'humanitarian' war are based on faulty premises.⁷⁵ Neoconservatives describe the military interventions in Haiti (1994), Bosnia (1995) and Kosovo (1999) as early examples of 'preemptive intervention', justified as the use of 'force to preempt harm to those nations' citizens and their neighbors when there was no direct threat to the United States'.⁷⁶ On this view, the pre-emptive war over Iraq was not a radical departure from US foreign policy practice or international norms regulating the use of force.

Recall the neoconservative criticism of classical realism as contributing to the problem of relativism. Uncomfortable grounding foreign policy in high ideals and moral crusades, realists counsel caution. They assume that states, even authoritarian regimes, are rational and even predictable, restrained by self-interest and the wish to survive. Classical realist scepticism of the high rhetoric of world transformation and missionary zeal derives from gloomy assumptions about human nature, power, and the constraints of the interstate system. Order and stability matter most for realists, despite the unfortunate human costs. Practitioners of *realpolitik* advocate action for

⁷² Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, p. 110.

⁷³ Martha Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention: Changing Beliefs about the Use of Force* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); Jennifer Welsh (ed.), *Humanitarian Intervention and International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁷⁴ NATO's 1999 Kosovo intervention played an important role in the transformation of foreign policy views in the Republican Party in the United States, turning many into neoconservatives broadly defined. Many Republicans opposed the intervention on the grounds that it was counter to traditional (realist) national interests. But Republicans such as Senator John McCain, though ambivalent until NATO started dropping bombs, became much more interventionist. At the same time, influential neoconservative writers such as William Kristol were arguing for the moral imperative to intervene and supported McCain over George W. Bush in the Republican primaries of 2000 because he was potentially more 'neocon'.

⁷⁵ According to Kaplan and Kristol, when Europeans complain about 'unilateral' military US actions in favour of some 'consensus of the "world community"' they are actually 'practicing a form of power politics dressed up as international morality'. The UN, a collection of nation-states, most of them corrupt, should not be considered a higher moral authority than the United States. This is to falsely assume that US interests and those of 'humanity are inherently incompatible'. *The War Over Iraq*, pp. 93, 92, 112.

⁷⁶ Kaplan and Kristol, *The War Over Iraq*, pp. 87–8.

narrow national interest, not abstract ideals. Morgenthau thought of 'interests defined in terms of power' and preferred order over unrealisable international justice. He understood the tragedy of the political, the undecided conflict.⁷⁷ What was good today could be evil tomorrow.

From the neoconservative perspective, these classical realist views not only misunderstand the dangerous character of America's enemies. Realism misconstrues the nature of the political and is itself a reflection of moral decay. Its soulless philosophy is less an *American* Cold War strategy than an 'unsentimental *realpolitik* practiced by . . . *European* statesmen like Bismarck and Metternich'.⁷⁸ It represents in the international realm everything that is wrong with modern politics. The political is defined by the struggle between good and evil. To deny this is to rob the modern individual of a vibrant source of moral purpose. The American people, Kristol wrote, 'really do believe that there is such a thing as the "public interest" – a *res publica* that is something more than the summation of individual interests'.⁷⁹ To express this national-public interest in the international sphere is the goal of neoconservative international thought. Indeed, the domestic and the international are brought together into a coherent and powerful whole in a manner unmatched by realism.⁸⁰

Through a moral foreign policy with which the American people can identify the domestic and the international are united in a celebration of national greatness. In liberating Iraq, America also potentially frees itself to pursue its global mission. The biggest danger, however, even before the 9/11 attacks, was that the American people would be afraid to utilise their unmatched power to shape the world further to their advantage.⁸¹ Global peace and liberal democratic principles depend on it; the alternative is the collapse of international order and the further disintegration of republican values. Foreign policy neoconservatives rework ideas about American national origin and 'republican virtue' in an effort to mobilise a political base around distinctive foreign policies supported by particular forms of public rhetoric.⁸² What are these values and rhetorical norms practised in the ideal neoconservative public? What is the content of public discourse and what is its relationship to the politics of justifying war?

Strauss viewed religion as central to maintaining moral purpose in the life of modern liberal citizens; neoconservatives tap into the religiosity of US society (combined with Jeffersonian republic-worship) in a way more naturally secular liberals find more difficult. Indeed, especially in the domestic sphere, a combination of religion and aggressive nationalism become the central political ideology of the Republic. The primary attachment of the majority of citizens should be toward national greatness. A reverence for the Founding Fathers, itself often approaching a religious fervour, supports neoconservative ideas about American values being triumphant and universal, that certain truths are 'self-evident' in nature, and in the

⁷⁷ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948).

⁷⁸ Kaplan and Kristol, *The War Over Iraq*, p. 46, second emphasis added.

⁷⁹ Kristol, *Reflections of a Neoconservative*, pp. xiv–xv.

⁸⁰ Williams, 'What is the National Interest?.'

⁸¹ Robert Kagan and William Kristol (eds.), *Present Dangers: Crisis and Opportunity in American Foreign and Defense Policy* (San Francisco, CA: Encounter Books, 2000).

⁸² This practice is not unique to neoconservatives. President Clinton pointed to the historical struggles over the place of multicultural diversity in the United States as part of the 'liberal' narrative of 'humanitarian war' over Kosovo in 1999.

moral character of the American people. An over-riding commitment to these national and civic values gives meaning to the body politic, to the American regime.

Neoconservatives believe, or want the public to believe, that the founding principles of the Republic are self-evident truths applicable to all across time and place. Yet political participation of only a certain kind is praised. Unruly action in multiple and diverse public spaces is feared. Civil disobedience and anti-war dissenters are treated with suspicion. The ideal citizen votes, is a patriot, holds traditional values about family and state; they shop and follow their gut instincts. They are spectators, especially of foreign policy, aroused to support the 'national interest' in an emotional way they know to be right. Neoconservative leaders are men of action. But this is not government action to correct social ills related to class, gender or race. The ideal civic engagement is 'faith-based' initiatives, a form of compassionate conservatism rather than social-democratic action in favour of redistributive justice.

The compassion of the 'American people' has traditionally been represented as the political terrain of the liberal-Left. But the sentiment has more recently been appropriated in the popular language and ideology of the Christian Right. The moral tone of 'compassionate conservatism' revolves around the distinctly neoconservative symbolism of faith and social attachment to the (traditional) family, nation and God.⁸³ As Arendt might remark, President Bush has sought 'to raise compassion to the rank of the supreme political passion and of the highest political virtue'.⁸⁴ Compassionate conservatism is based on a moral clarity, explicitly billed as a corrective to the immoral, decadent, Clinton years. The religiosity of the Bush administration is not new to the United States or unique to the political right. And yet the political mobilisation of the religious right has been central to the shift of compassion from a liberal to a conservative concept and has shaped both domestic and foreign policy discourse.

Central to this vision is the resoluteness, moral clarity and good intentions of the President as a leader of the nation and commander-in-chief. As Strauss put it, the 'only thing which can be held to be unqualifiedly good is . . . not the cultivation of the mind . . . but a good intention, and of good intentions everyone is as capable as everyone else, wholly independently of good education'.⁸⁵ In the absence of discovering weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, Bush not only evoked the higher political objective of 'freeing' the Iraqi people, but also his moral clarity. The emphasis on emotion and gut instincts, a disregard for facts in favour of statements about the 'march of freedom', is typical of a presidency famously dismissive of nuance, and makes more sense in light of neoconservative ideas.

In a rare prime-time presidential press conference this question was asked: 'One of the biggest criticisms of you is that whether it's WMD in Iraq, postwar planning in Iraq, or even the question of whether this administration did enough to ward off 9/11, you never admit a mistake. Is that a fair criticism? And do you believe there were any errors in judgment that you made related to any of those topics?'⁸⁶ President Bush did

⁸³ Marvin Olasky, *Compassionate Conservatism: What it is, What it Does, and How it can Transform America* (foreword by George W. Bush) (New York: Free Press, 2000).

⁸⁴ Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 70.

⁸⁵ Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p. 22.

⁸⁶ 'President Addresses the Nation in Prime Time Press Conference', 13 April 2004. Available at: (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/04/20040413-20.html>) [accessed 20 June 2006].

not respond directly in the terms of the question. Rather he referred to America's new war-footing and how the 9/11 attacks could not have been predicted. On Iraq, he said:

The people know where I stand. I mean, in terms of Iraq, I was very clear about what I believed. And, of course, I want to know why we haven't found a weapon yet. But I still know Saddam Hussein was a threat, and the world is better off without Saddam Hussein. I don't think anybody can – maybe people can argue that. I know the Iraqi people don't believe that, that they're better off with Saddam Hussein – would be better off with Saddam Hussein in power. I also know that there's an historic opportunity here to change the world. And it's very important for the loved ones of our troops to understand that the mission is an important, vital mission for the security of America and for the ability to change the world for the better. (Emphases added.)

The President's denial of the likelihood of error is made possible through accepting the logic of a world-changing idea, an ideology. The content of the ideology matters less than what ideology does to the mind and the kind of explanation that it allows.

The drive behind Bush's position, and the kind of thinking that enables it, was identified long ago by Arendt. It 'is based not so much on superior intelligence as on the correct interpretation of the essentially reliable forces in history or nature, forces which neither defeat nor ruin can prove wrong because they are bound to assert themselves in the long run'.⁸⁷ The forces of history in neoconservative thought are men of action founding the right political regimes. History has proved them right and ideology is a means to this end. 'Its subject matter is history', Arendt wrote, 'to which the "idea" is applied; the result of this application is not a body of statements about something that *is*, but the unfolding of a process . . . They [ideologies] are historical, concerned with becoming and perishing . . . The "idea" of an ideology . . . has become an instrument of explanation'.⁸⁸ The instrument of explanation in neo-conservative ideology, and expressed in Bush's rhetoric, is the self-evident truths established at the founding of the American regime, the superiority of American values and the inevitability of the march of freedom. The question of error or regret need not be addressed. Certain forms of public rhetoric enable troublesome facts to be downplayed. Indeed, certain ideological conviction need not admit of the possibility of a substantial mistake.

To change the world is ideologically mandated in neoconservative thought. When combined with a real capacity to act, when neoconservative ideas are listened to by the powerful and shape public rhetoric, there is a great temptation to exaggerate the possibilities for doing so. In 2003, Vice President Dick Cheney remarked that the early signs of widespread armed resistance to the US occupation were the last gasps of the defunct Baathist regime. But as Arendt wrote in the 1960s, 'To call such unexpected, unpredicted, unpredictable happenings "random events" or "the last gasps of the past", condemning them to irrelevance or the famous "dustbin of

⁸⁷ Arendt, *Origins*, p. 349. Arendt's writing on the Vietnam War suggested that such beliefs went some of the way toward explaining how apparently intelligent individuals in the inner circles of government can be so badly mistaken in their understanding of political realities. In particular, see 'Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers', in *Crises of the Republic*.

⁸⁸ Arendt, *Origins*, p. 469. She took total ideological explanations for world history to be destructive of political freedom. 'For respect for human dignity implies the recognition of my fellow-men or our fellow-nations as subjects, as builders of worlds or cobuilders of a common world. No ideology which aims at the explanation of all historical events of the past and at mapping out the course of events of the future can bear the unpredictability which springs from the fact that men are creative, that they can bring forward something so new that nobody ever foresaw it'. *Origins*, p. 458.

history'', is the oldest trick in the trade; the trick, no doubt, helps in clearing up the theory, but at the price of removing it further from reality'.⁸⁹ Great power is perhaps most likely to fall into this trap, as evidenced in the hubris of the Bush administration prior to the war in Iraq, the refusal to see, or admit to seeing, the real difficulties that would lie ahead.

For factual truths about the nature of Iraqi society, about the ambiguity of pre-war intelligence, about the limits of the power of high-tech warfare possess no inherent right to be as they are. In the political realm, all factual truths are contingent; they 'carry no inherent truth within themselves, no necessity to be as they are'.⁹⁰ There was no necessary reason why Iraq did not pose an urgent threat to the United States. There was no necessary reason Saddam did not possess weapons of mass destruction. There was no necessary reason Iraq was not supporting al Qaeda or seeking uranium from Niger. There was no necessary reason the invasion and occupation would not be a 'cake walk'. There was no necessary reason all Iraqis would not greet 'liberation' with flowers. There was no necessary reason why the first insurgents were not the last gasp of the defunct Baathist regime. But there is also no necessary reason why America should ultimately win.

Conclusion

'Strangely . . .' Arendt remarked, 'the clash of factual truth and politics . . . has – in some respects, at least – very similar traits' to the clash between philosophy and politics.⁹¹ The whole purpose of political action is to bring into being something new. Action is 'the very stuff politics are made of'.⁹² For Arendt, this freedom requires an ability to imagine that things as they are may be different, to refuse to accept the 'unyielding, blatant, unpersuasive stubbornness' of what is.⁹³ Truth may be stubborn but factual truth, in particular, is the most vulnerable because it is easily outmanoeuvred by the constantly changing world. Political action and the lie have something deeply in common; 'the deliberate denial of factual truth – the ability to lie – and the capacity to change facts – the ability to act – are interconnected; they owe their existence to the same source: imagination'.⁹⁴ In *The Neoconservative Imagination*, a collection of essays in honour of Irving Kristol, political engagement is presented as key to this practical philosophy.⁹⁵ The goal is not only to advise statesmen. It is to effect dramatic social change. Thus we see the particular reasons why neoconservative thought appears to have trouble with factual truth.

Arendt was far from naïve when it came to the place of lying in the political realm. In her words, 'the lie did not creep into politics by some accident of human sinfulness. Moral outrage, for this reason alone, is not likely to make it disappear'.⁹⁶ Governments lie during wartime for a variety of reasons; it is endemic to the practice of war;

⁸⁹ Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, p. 110.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁹¹ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 236.

⁹² Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, p. 6.

⁹³ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 237.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁹⁵ DeMuth and Kristol (eds.), *The Neoconservative Imagination*.

⁹⁶ Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, p. 6.

'lying as such is neither new nor necessarily foolish in politics. Lies have always been regarded as justifiable in emergencies, lies that concerned specific secrets, especially in military matters, which had to be shielded against the enemy'.⁹⁷ Indeed, following Machiavelli, the realist tradition is most often associated with deceit. To step from Strauss's exposition of what he took to be Plato's distinction between exoteric and esoteric writing to the gap between rhetoric and reality characteristic of the Bush administration fails to appreciate the inherent clash between politics and truth of every kind. It is not the idea of the 'noble lie' that should concern us. As Arendt once remarked, 'political secrecy hardly ever ends in anything nobler than the vulgar duplicity of a spy'.⁹⁸ She dismissed Strauss's 'noble lie' reading of Plato without ever mentioning his name.⁹⁹

The more general problem is not individual wickedness, or the content of any particular theory, but the nature of the political realm itself. There is an *inevitable* clash between politics and factual truth. But it is made even worse by the ideological assumptions of neoconservative thought. The point is not to argue that neoconservative policies are more likely to lead to public lies. Liberals also tend to defend 'human rights' wars, even when exposed as hypocritical. Hypocrisy, a form of lie, is sometimes condoned by liberals because the alternative is worse: human rights are revealed to be the conceit of the powerful.¹⁰⁰ Neoconservatives similarly defend high ideals, even when hypocritically evoked, because they are necessary to give the public something to believe in and fight for. Both liberals and neoconservatives politically cheat for the same reason; they desire to change the world and believe in the power of ideas to do so. There is something particular about the neoconservative temptation to deny certain factual truths. But it is *also* in the very 'nature of the political realm to be at war with truth in all its forms'.¹⁰¹ It is for this reason, not for any noble lie, that men and women of action appear to so easily trade in falsehoods.

An excess of moral clarity not only leads to bad foreign policy – the realists show us that – but the denial of political facts, Arendt also suggested, is destructive of the public culture necessary for 'freedom' and 'democracy' to make sense at all. The outcome of this conflict between Arendt and the neoconservatives holds important implications for the place of ideas and ideology in shaping political judgements about contemporary war. The danger, for Arendt, was that 'ideological thinking ruins all relationships with reality'.¹⁰² Ideology will not substitute for reality. As neoconservatives have learned in Iraq, reality has 'no substitute' and no ideology can substitute for thought. The world catches up because the ideological thinker 'can remove his

⁹⁷ Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgement* (New York, Schocken, 2003), p. 264.

⁹⁸ Arendt, *Origins*, p. 218.

⁹⁹ In a footnote Arendt wrote: 'I hope no one will tell me any more that Plato was the inventor of the "noble lie". This belief rested on a misreading of a crucial passage (414C) in *The Republic*, where Plato speaks of one of his myths . . . as a *ψευδος*. Since the same Greek word signifies "fiction", "error", and "lie" according to context – when Plato wants to distinguish between error and lie, the Greek language forces him to speak of "involuntary" and "voluntary" *ψευδος* . . . ; under no circumstances can it be understood as a recommendation of lying as we understand it. Plato, of course, was permissive about occasional lies to deceive the enemy or insane people . . . But contrary to the cave allegory, no principle is involved in these passages.' *Between Past and Future*, p. 298f.

¹⁰⁰ See Owens, *Between War and Politics*, ch. 6.

¹⁰¹ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 239.

¹⁰² Arendt, *Origins*, p. 474.

mind from it but not his body',¹⁰³ or we might add the bodies of those in American uniform. Neoconservatives may be experts at selling war. They seem less adept at winning them.

¹⁰³ Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, p. 36.